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This thesis is a collection of poems, most of which were written during the past six months. They deal with both past and present experiences, attempting within the tension of their own form to render as accurately as possible these experiences, to set them straight, as it were, and in so doing discover their meaning and significance. In many of the major poems this is done through presenting a narrative or a dramatic situation; other poems rely on a more imagistic technique. In either case, the concern is with the symbolic significance growing out of a careful consideration and recreation of place, object, or event.

A Thesis Submitted to
the Faculty of the Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

Greensboro
April, 1968

Approved by

Robert Watson
Thesis Advisor

APPROVED 1968
1968
This thesis has been approved by the following committee
of the Faculty of the Graduate School at The University of
North Carolina at Greensboro

WINDOWS

by

Kathryn Stripling

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APPROVAL SHEET

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To My Brother

The day the falling myrtle blew about
the porch like snarls of ravished snow
and stained the leaves around the steps in slow
relentless ruin, we walked the longer route
down to the ready fields, our thoughts stretched out
as thick as grass along the path to close
the span between the carnage and the rows
of bright leaves ruffling to a bluejay's shout.

The end of thinking was a turn where all
at once the sky broke through the branches' snare,
came flowing over fence-tops with a pall
from August clouds grown heavy with the care
of rain. And there within the same wind's pull
and sway, the myrtle trees stood mutely bare.

Windows

As a bluejay on the clothesline rages at the tangled clouds
that darken and a squirrel's tail gathers into stillness
in the maples, nothing moves behind this bedroom window
but my own hand looping ink between
the margins of a page.

Beside my feet the dog lies dreaming downwind
into currents of contented quail
and wet-nosed rabbits in the field that shutters
every sleeping like the yellow windowshade I pull
against the night. And though the first rain quivers

in the treetops like a giant musician's tuning fork
and clicks the black-striped beetles from the trellis,
neither of us looks up at the fleeing jay,
the empty clothesline limp as broken string;

(another afternoon, a bone of blue ink for my name,
a vanished bird).

And yet I sometimes wonder to my friends on nights
when fire licks at the patient logs like lizards
freed from frost and pall of padlocked graneries,
how both the dog and I, beside this very window,
watched daylight streaming cobwebs in the distant woods
until we saw the pasture raise another window
through the latticework of shadow-stricken trees
onto a herd of black cows at a water trough,
dawn sky,
the incandescent weeds.

Finding My Freshman Photograph in a Bureau Drawer

Lying here beneath old scarves and souvenirs,
this photograph floats through my Sunday calm
like the shadow of a wren across the sheets at sunrise,
sounds of windchimes in a vacant room;

and when I lift it as I might a spider web
undone and tangled in my open palm,
a girl's face smiles beyond my shoulder
toward the gray rectangle of my window shade

that's lowered on the backyard twigs
where leaves pull free and scatter to the wind.
I turn it slowly in the late fall twilight,
hearing rainfrogs by a lakeside, the creaking of a swing.

It sheds its pale dust on my fingertips
like the powder from a butterfly's torn wing.

Apprehension

Before cicadas' crackled shells and skeletons
of month's dead cows beneath the midday sun
could make me stumble and cry out in dreams,
I waded through the rippling fields and gleam
of quail would wink through grass and sway
like small fire set about to light my way
back through the listing gate. Above me and below,
the stream of summer brimmed with endless flow
of small feet hieing to the call of morning light
that led us all. And when again at night
the silvered owl beyond the lamplight conjured day,
I felt the field lap over blankets like a sea
of soft green tongues that whispered deep
into my ear, "No need to dream in this full sleep."

Now dreams are like weak dams I set against
the steady seepage that leaves darkness clenched
with nothing held but blanched bones, withered grass.

Harvests

My father made the birds fly overhead
that afternoon in late fall when he lifted
me above the weeds as tall as I was then
into a wagon load of hay. There at the field's edge
while he whistled, restless in the cold,
I watched the shadows of the nearby pines
trail the woods like tattered clouds. And though

with both arms crossed, he brooded on the silent stalks
and never noticed me again before the wagons
turned toward home at dusk, I know
I saw him standing by the sea of stubble,
waving me goodbye until I reached the gatepost
where I sent his goodbye back across the weeds.

But he had disappeared into his ruined rows
with the dust that sifted through the dying light;
he left me reaping shadows for his hand until the branches
at the road's bend hid the field. That's when
the swallows rising from a roadside thicket
streaked the early darkness with their wings
before they turned and followed sunset out of sight.

I saw their feathers gleam like grain thrown on the wind.

On Seeing "Gone with the Wind" for the Fifth Time

The wide screen still squelches me into the role
of a wallflower wilting as Scarlett herself
blossoms out of the weeds on the hill
overlooking the grounds of her Hollywood mansion

and I in a back row sip orangeade lamenting
my short hair,
my short skirt,
and a waist that could never be threaded that tight,

though I once thought it could if I had it to do:
if I had to go stumbling through briar-ridden roads
leading a mule and a sick cow,
watching with ash in my hair
for the moon to break out of the clouds and discover the house
still unvanquished.

Now, of course, nothing could happen that way.
I've crawled back too often to find the house
lost with no struggle, no stranger
to fight but my shadow that siphons the light from the mirror.
(And the yankees never came into my part of Georgia.)

So, Scarlett, though I fancied us so much alike
on that day in July when I sat by myself on the porch,
the crepe myrtle swelling with wind like a treeful of
birthday balloons,
the hands in the folds of my skirt
soft and white as yours must have been,

you reel into the darkness to wait for tomorrow
while I take my ease deserting the gloom
of the emptying theatre for the white streak of sidewalk
where I wait at the corner for the street light to change,
the scent of blown myrtle parting the clouds from my moon.

A Corn Field in Early Autumn

The bus had been two hours out of home,
a gray pod on the grayer stalk of highway
headed north, and I, forgetting partings
that day's dawning, dreamed of hands in wet dirt;

when rousing from my dream in time
to watch us take a curve around a row
of trees that seemed to barricade the sky
from earth, I saw what green had left behind:

the corn field rising with a sudden hummock
fell from out the fringe of everlasting green
and glittered on the wrinkled mound of earth,
stalks bent and tattered, roiled by sun;

and as we passed it by, the brush of branches
soaked it up again. I thought it gone
until I dozed and dreamed of golden graveyards
where decay is sweet and strange sleek hogs

root deep upon the summer's dying grain.

A Spinster Takes a Bus Ride in December

Looking up from the sloping chain of barb-wire fence,
I watch the blonde across the aisle stub out
her cigarette and giggle at a joke the football star
beside me whispers loud enough for only her to hear.
Our eyes meet as we round a curve that crooks a sickle
through the oat fields while she perches,

one leg swinging, on the grimy seat that lurches
the gold pin anchored to her small left breast
into the spatter of the window light. And when
she barely brushes by it with her fingertips,
she looks the way they always look this time of year,
the quick gaze hooded like a haughty owl;

I'll lay my odds she's planning how to tell
about some Joe or Tom who's waiting with a ring
a few miles down the road. I've seen it all before;
no wonder that I choose the quilt of barren fields
to stroke me into sleep instead, the whisper
of the wheels. I'll try forgetting for a time

the locked house ghosting in the grapevines,
the pot plants waiting for their water by the window
as I hurdle toward them like an asteroid.
They waver into clouds, already dimming half-extinct
inside my hundred mile long dream of passing pine trees
giving way to soft rain at the end. And yet

whatever secret sleep keeps hidden underneath my sight,
the blonde girl treading winter noon has rattled
into silence with her bracelets, giggling once again
until I wake to hear the story of her Richard
who's a lawyer. They'll be married in July,
a garden wedding (it couldn't rain!) if she can graduate

in time. She turns to light another cigarette
and we are swept around another curve; the fence posts
fall away like shuffling cards. But still I lean
my cheek against the window pane as though it were a tuft
of summer grass. There's nothing much I haven't seen
along this road: the scattered roofs, the wind-stripped boughs

that seep into my very own square slot of sky
where the weak sun drowns into the puddle of a passing cloud.

Walking My Friend's Dog

The dog is not mine
but she thinks so at night when I run her
and leash her along to my path
which is never her own but much straighter and careful
of danger for her sake. And this makes

her writhe on the rope like a worm
that I string past the eyes of the neighborhood dogs
as we streak through back alleys and bushes
bound fast for the strict slope of campus
where lovers ignore us from the backseats of cars

and the March moon mosaics the grass
into unsteady ice floes swept seaward by spring
while we scramble to find out a foothold,
but weak-kneed and both breathing hard
for the fall through to darkness, the drowning.

Virginia's Warning

Last weekend my friend sent a message by mail,
a folded-up card that unfurled like a banner
as though it were every inch of a State Invitation
requesting the honor of my presence

at the Governor's Valentine fancy-dress ball.
But it cautioned me never to make the same mistake
twice, which I heeded as long as I read it
and whenever I see it again on the wall

as I wait by my dressing-stand mirror,
the bright bottles dazzling my eyes that are dimming
so fast with the shadow that creeps from my side
while the wind goads the lawn grass to frenzy.

Black Cat

Crouched at my doorstep this morning
the cat seemed a relic of darkness,
an old premonition
that toppled the dawn like a boulder,
the clenched fist that raps on the window at dusk.

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the cat seemed a relic of darkness,
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that toppled the dawn like a boulder,
the clenched fist that raps on the window at dusk.

Power Failure

Now we know who has the upper hand.
And the domestic darkness has no apologetic look
as it rushes out to meet its kindred kind,
entwining like a pair of mating snakes in twilight back

of our front door. The bats fly wider circles
and the crickets fiddle with a rare abandon
as we search the kitchen shelves for scraps of candles
with which to reassert our lost dominion

over night. One here, another there, they seem
like lispng tongues of ingenues unfit to reason
with the dark while we, uneasy in our chairs, lean
back to wait and dare to whisper, "treason."

The Creek

The shock of toes submerged, a cactus hurt
of nerves unused to cold; then deeper down
into the sinking, holding yet to sounds
of sunlight playing on the dryer dirt
on up the hill from water that say, "Skirt
the deep side always. Keep your head up," (frown
of concentration as the arms go down
another inch with tendons on alert).

Just then a rhythm dancing round the knees
and nibbling on the toes like guileful fish
that flash from shadows darker than one sees
with eyes. Soon rocks relax their swish
of warning in the current, feet unfreeze
to touch the bottom with a deeper wish.

The Hardest Frost

That winter by glazed fields, we watched autumn die grass-poor. And every morning tolled the frost as heavy as the Baptists' bells, with stones so cold they seemed to threaten. Only fire inside the house could keep our eyes from summer still alive in leaves, entombed beneath the ice.

You stood beside the hearth, clinked cubes of ice inside your glass. "I know that I will die. Life's been an autumn--always keeping summer on its edge, those first suns. Even frost was melted soon enough." (the click of fire like small gold clocks) "But listen, I've heard stones..."

You stopped. How could I tell you I heard stones speak too, that lasted past the melting ice and said: here seasons stop. For, see this fire. We've built it every year and watched it die, then walked cold furrows whistling. Why should frost this morning send us longing for the summer?

Or had we dreamed too hard that night of summer underneath our roof until the glint of stones, swift, sharpened by the sun and calling frost to stay until the Maying, waked us like ice slipped down the spine? I laughed. "But who can die now with his hands so close beside this fire?"

So you laughed too, and looked into the fire. Then on the wall bird shadows flashed. Summer rattled in our minds. And we could feel it die as quick as meeting of hard ground and stones; we saw it melting, gone on last night's ice. You said, "Today we had our hardest frost."

And it stayed fresh all morning: shroud-like frost too cold for human sight, waiting out the fire we built, in plains of new, unmelting ice. One log fell, then another. "Well, what of summer. One can't argue with eternity--and stones." You poked the logs. "We'll let this old fire die."

For sure that day comes with its hardest frost when stones speak and we let our summer die so quietly into ice; there, standing by the fire.

On Returning Home to Find My Dog Ready to Die

For years I could say he was mine
and believe it was true while he ransacked
the pine woods for rabbits,
though really for scraps of stray sunlight and wind,

because after a while he would come
if I called loud enough from the edge of the backyard
and waited out whatever chase he was belling
through the tall weeds and bushes like a foghorn lost

six miles from shore. But now as he sleeps on the carpet
and only the low drum of earth fills his ears,
he can let all his spring rabbits scatter to safety
and listen for no one at last

but the dust sifting down through the long afternoon
or a faraway slow wave subsiding.

Meeting an Old Friend

"It is almost as hard for friends to meet
as for the morning and evening stars."

Tu Fu: To My Retired
Friend Wei

And you have come back again,
bringing your smiles like random
shafts of familiar sun
that now rarely breaks upon
the pallor of indifferent days.
I watch you as you sit.
You seem but little changed
as your hand reaches mine
across the book you gave
that Christmas when it rained
all day and we sat by the fire
to write our friendship into
one brief line in the space
above the title's words.
We pressed our secret gifts
like favorite petals within
the pages of our separate days.
But here between our chairs lie
blooms of new flowers strange to me
that leave their scent on your arms
like wild gardens dark in cold lands
where no one is known to the other.
Alone, we shield our doubt with laughter,
talk into each other's vastness
while I aim my glances weakly,
knowing that soon you will rise
and take with you the dried leaves
of what I once could touch.

For a Friend Who Never Fell in Love

You were telling me something about love,
or the lack of it,
that summer we sat on the sun porch
and the curtains swelled toward us like budsheaths
and fingered our faces. You said,

(I remember you said it as though you were staring
down depths of a well that was empty)
"I want to be madly, unreasonably in love
with someone." A bird shook the leaves
on a branch, then you looked up and told me,
"I'm jealous of you."

But I suppose you've forgotten you said it,
or that I barely heard you for watching the wind
tease the skirt from my knees. And there's
no use reminding you now that I envy
that girlhood of you by the window still waiting
and wondering and whiling away in the sunlight,
unwary of deep wells and wind.

A Friend in Need

When I came to you, needing a friend
like a rat needs the cage wall to dash itself into,
half-drunk with the rites of rerunning
my pride through the maze of those long summer midnights
when you helped me hide from the slow-setting moon,

you smiled back at me from your ribbons and postcards
like a woman grown tired of pretending
her peace as she stands by the window to brush
out her hair, and you said to me,

"Kay," (but so softly I barely could hear it),
"I've wandered in dreams all my life," while I counted
the threads raveled loose in the carpet,
"And now nothing happens that hasn't a thousand times
better before." And you said again,

"Kay," and I nodded.

"Wake up," and I nodded.

And later I left you alone to your mirror that scattered
your smile like the wind on a pool sweeps the sun into struggle.

A Great-Aunt Going Blind

Every afternoon beside her window she waits,
watching how her veil of sunlight tangles high
above the rest home roof on maple boughs that push
their new growth toward the unassailable sky.

The air swarms with a thousand silver butterflies
that light upon her eyes like scales on matted streams.
What miracle of mottled leaves to trace, or grooved rocks;
what dark lilies upshooting through her dreams?

The cars of her two sons who never fail to come
each afternoon for cheerful conversation after three,
are gleaming like the shells of dime-store turtles,
red and aqua-blue beneath her maple tree;

but she is thinking now of how two flower beds
who never knew were there have just begun to bloom,
how one of them is red and must be roses.
Soon she smells their scent rise in the room

dispelling odors from the supper trays below.
And as she settles with the afternoon's decline,
a speck of blackbird rends her window view
then leaves her like a foundered snail behind.

But as if all day expecting this one sign,
she fondles the blue pearl buttons on her dress
and smiles as crickets in the nearby pine grove
begin their evening clamor. For within the wilderness

beneath her eyelids, she is seeing wings fly on
beyond the maples, past the cemetery's ridge,
and up to twilight leaning toward the town,
their feathers vibrant, barely ruffled in the wind;

until she feels that she alone has made them fly
and, oh so quietly no one else could know,
has touched the hem of her retreating sky.

Pine Cone

Fledgling fallen to grass, brown-thrasher back
ruffled like a dog's tail or thistle
that tiptoes the edge of a wheat field,

how it showered the air with its feathers
when I held it to windward, as if it were trailing
a whole flock of starlings

by flying whatever was able, the frail flakes,
until it lay spent in my fingers
as empty as a mouse carcass kicked under brush.

So I let it fall back to the grass where it heaved
over once, twice-teetered, grew still
while the wind rattled pine straw around it;

but here in my footprints what plumage
was planted as far faster wings
streaming southward were gathered to nest in the night.

Summer Rain

Now a gentle falling, fading into wind from which it came,
the droplets idling on the boughs, twirling from the leaves,
and the clouds unhurried as if stirred by just a whim of sun
which heralds its return, but shyly,
in the halting bass of frogs
and in the murmurings of birds imbedded in the forest,
like the warm, moonlit unfurling of a swollen bud.

Nocturne

It is midnight and the house is dark.
The rain has stopped its mincing walk
upon the sodden leaves.
Drops teeter, fall away into a spin.
The night is like a hollow reed.


Through trees and trees of soundlessness
one mockingbird begins to sing,
persistent underneath the moon,
and singing not the night or rain,
but something of its own concern

while the darkness leans away from sound
to listen solemn and attuned,
until the bird-call, fading, leaves
the night asway with solitary singing,
piping moonlight into morning.

On Calder's "The Whirling Ear"

Brazen as blind sound itself,
it twists through the still sky
like a fish rudder railing for port

which is everywhere waiting like light.
And the soft ground will breathe on its wild lobes,
and the trees rub their knuckles against it in wind,
for the great ear has heard its own pulse.



Underwater wedding

For Jay

A Church would surely condemn the deed
and their bodies were white as
snow, glowing with white light
as I watched and they were chained at the altar

The children were like
lost birds, flying
and my friends were like
ghosts, silent and alone

I watched her and alone in the deep, open hall
while you were there, the light was
as clear as the sea and I knew that
that was the end of the world

II

For Vincent

Underwater Wedding

for Kay

a church mouse choir squeaked the song
and their scores were white blanks
crawling with whole note runaway ants
as I clutched and sank ankle chained at the altar

the candles swam like twisting eels
and my canvas thick veil
and my plastic hair like a man-o-war,
plate coins shifting like silver fish

i married low and alone in the sloped open hall
while gale winds rocked the rowboat pews
as claw waves rose and i yessed the sky
that came blackened at me squirming

John Hulbert

Underwater Wedding Night

for John

Came upward alone from the sloped open hall
still yessing the sky that squirmed sullen
with swan songs of drowning mice
and cold wax of choked candle flames

as I, low-wedded, stood on the shell steps
to heave high my rosebuds
like stones at the first stars (I laughed
at my small ring that winked like a fisheye)

while wind whipped my shoulders to salt spray
and all night my hair waded reeds
as I lay me down dreaming in sea-foam
that stroked me like blankets of dead grass.

After the Vows

But what brought me here to this floodgate,
the floor of this mermaid's retreat
on the knees of a salt-shriven virgin
to fashion my flesh to the bones of this spirit
that lurks like an eel in the glades?

But the waves wail, "What matter?" I whirl
with my weight like a bottle fast-filling with brine.
How I sink! Yet I flash like a star
swept aside in the wake of a rowboat
that's found its way out to wide sea

as I waltz from the slow reeds on slippers
of seaweed to mingle my mirth
with the silver-eyed fish bringing bubbles
to cast on my unhurried exit
like pebbles strewn over an uncovered grave.

Morning

My long gown was swollen with slime
as I followed the green sun to surface
and stretched in the plaudits
of seagulls that littered the cast-open sky.

One orchid was left on my breastbone,
a dead seaman's hand. When I hurled it away,
to the gulls on my shoulder, it crumbled like chalk
in my fingers and bled white my soft wedded palm.

What daylight is this, I was asking the birds
while my hairpins unloosened like slivers of moonrise.
But they had all flown out to sea, and I anchored
my eyelids like long-dying moths to the sea-bottom sand.

For Old Time's Sake

Once I was jealous of lovers confined to cramped passion
in unlighted sportscars, content with their breath
having blinded raised windows to darkness

and me as I hurried back home
with the moon caught for kicks in the net of my lashes
like the birds that kept flying all night

through my dreams of white lace. But tonight
while this real wedding lace rubs my wrist like a razor blade
biding its time under stacks of old letters,

I'll set free that moon light that once scorched my eyelids
and dream it to drowning in sea depths that hold me
as still as an oat field forsaken by wild, wind-sown birds.